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Educators blame Internet for rise in student cheating

By **Lynn Thompson**

Times Snohomish County Bureau

The Roosevelt High School literature assignment, an analysis of three works by American authors, was composed of awkward sentences full of clumsy grammar — except for the occasional flawless paragraph with complex syntax and striking observation.

The teacher, David Ehrich, suspected an Internet cut-and-paste job. When he confronted the student, the boy broke down and admitted to copying whole sections of his essay from the Web.

The widespread use of the Internet as a research tool has given rise to another phenomenon — widespread cheating among high-school students.

"The use of the Internet for plagiarism is rampant," said David Quinn, who teaches in the International Baccalaureate Program at Edmonds-Woodway High School and serves on a national committee of the College Board, the organization that administers the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

Educators say a generation of tech-savvy students, raised on the hacker's mantra that "information wants to be free" and accustomed to downloading copyrighted music, may not realize that copying even a few sentences from the Web and weaving them into their papers, without crediting the original source, constitutes plagiarism and is grounds for suspension from many schools.

Other students, driven by pressure to earn top grades and admission to prestigious colleges, or simply to complete an assignment they care little about, may plagiarize even though they know it's wrong.

"I wouldn't say it's rampant, but everyone's done it," said Roosevelt junior Brian Greggs. Last year, an editor of the Roosevelt student newspaper touched off a firestorm when she wrote that cheating was a way of life for many high-school students.

"Cheating is certainly an art and once you get good at it, you begin to feel proud of some of the genius cheating plans you have developed. Why would you waste your time working when you can spend it coming up with 20 different ways to cheat?" asked Hanna Lirman, who is now in college.

Lirman's article was accompanied by a poll of 460 students. Ninety percent said they'd cheated within the past several years; 71 percent admitted to copying material from the Internet to complete assignments.

Many Roosevelt faculty members were dismayed. Counselor Sarah Chapman, who had written a letter of recommendation for Lirman's college applications, said she considered withdrawing her support, but ultimately did not.

"What the article said to many of us was that the moral climate at Roosevelt isn't great. It hurt, frankly. It really hurt," Chapman said.

Web sites for cheaters

Just how easy is it to plagiarize these days? Type "Great Gatsby essay" into the popular Google Internet search engine, and dozens of Web sites pop up offering hundreds of essays on topics from symbolism to alcoholism. The site *123helpme.com* offers free essays, but charges for essays it says are of higher quality. Others sites, including *schoolsucks.com* — with its motto "download your workload" — promise essays on the same day for \$30.

Schools, however, are using technology to fight back. About 60 campuses in the greater Puget Sound area, including Edmonds-Woodway, Ingraham and Holy Names in Seattle, and Shorecrest in Shoreline, now subscribe to an Internet detection service, Turnitin.com, which can almost instantly survey billions of Internet sites and identify copied material in student papers.

Students submit their completed work online. The service produces a report for teachers that highlights material copied from other sources.

Schools pay a \$250 license fee and 60 cents per student enrolled for unlimited use. A school with an enrollment of 2,000 pays about \$1,450 per year. The site also retains a copy of every student paper submitted so classmates aren't tempted to pass on their work to friends.

Turnitin CEO John Barrie says that while academic cheating is nothing new, access to the Internet has elevated it to new levels. Highly publicized cases of disgraced plagiarizers, from Ivy League professors to newspaper reporters, have done little to discourage the trend, he said.

High-school students are almost a third more likely to plagiarize than college students, said Don McCabe, the founding director of the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University.

Over the past four years, McCabe has surveyed more than 70,000 students at 120 high schools and colleges. He found that 95 percent of high-school and college students admit to some form of academic cheating. About 60 percent of high-school students said on an anonymous questionnaire that they'd copied material from other sources into their own work. Forty-five percent of college students who responded to an Internet survey said they'd copied material.

When McCabe asked students why they cheat, they cited a range of reasons, including the competitive college-admissions process and pressure to perform. Others said they simply needed the credit and didn't care about the subject.

"Particularly many high-school students say they have no interest in school and will do whatever it takes to graduate," he said.

But McCabe disagreed that more students are plagiarizing than ever before.

"The Internet hasn't created that many new cheaters. It's expanding the opportunity for those who choose to cheat. They're doing it more often and more extensively," he said.

Following the rules

The rules for avoiding plagiarism are typically introduced in middle school. Direct quotes must be attributed to a speaker or to a written source, but students don't always understand that they must also cite sources for ideas that contributed to their writing.

The concept of leaving an intellectual trail so others may retrace the steps can be hard for students to grasp.

"They don't really get it in sixth grade," said Patricia Hearn, head teacher at Lake Washington Girls Middle School, a private school in South Seattle. "By eighth grade they understand that if they didn't think of an idea, they can't use it without attribution."

Most schools list plagiarism as a punishable offense. At Roosevelt, the first instance results in a zero grade and a requirement that the student rewrite the paper. Parents are notified. Subsequent violations are punished with a failing grade in the course and possible suspension.

At Seattle Preparatory, a private Catholic high school, the Parent/Student Handbook outlines the expectation of academic integrity. Every year, students and their parents must read the handbook and sign a statement that they understand the rules.

Students also are required to take theology courses each year. Jennifer Freeman, who heads the school's English department, said the curriculum's moral and ethical component sets a tone of honesty.

But Seattle Prep is one of the 60 schools in the region that has also subscribed to Turnitin. Freeman echoes the sentiments of many teachers when she says she doesn't want to spend her time searching the Internet to find a suspect passage in a student paper.

"Vocabulary is always a big tip-off. You know in your gut it's from somewhere, but a Google search takes forever," she said.

At Edmonds-Woodway, where the online service is being used this school year for the first time, some students welcome the step.

"I don't think it's fair for people to get a higher score on a paper that's partially plagiarized when I spend tedious hours coming up with original ideas," said senior Isabel Jones.

Some educators, however, say detection services only inspire more ingenious cheaters. They argue that carefully crafted assignments and more creative teaching is a better deterrent to plagiarism.

"Students often resort to cheating because they can, not because they have to," said Greg Van Belle, an English instructor at Edmonds Community College.

Van Belle said assigning an essay on the same topic year after year invites cheating. Better to vary assignments, link classic texts to current events, ask students to work in groups or to write about how a work of literature relates to their own lives, he said.

Van Belle typically introduces his students to Internet sites that offer canned essays. He uses it as an opportunity to critique bad writing and to let students know that he knows about these sites. He's had bright students who find perverse pleasure in trying to beat the system. He's had struggling students who turn to plagiarism out of desperation.

But as an academic, he's also aware that scholarship is built on other people's words and ideas. The challenge for teachers, he said, is to help students distinguish between scholarship and cheating.

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